Highway Debris, Long an Eyesore, Grows as Hazard

Patricia Leigh Brown

Published in the *New York Times* on May 9, 2007

SAN FRANCISCO, May 9 - It was just another California rush hour. On eastbound Interstate 580 near Pleasanton recently, a rocking chair brought traffic to a near-standstill, while on southbound I-680 near Walnut Creek, a trampoline blocked two left lanes, wreaking havoc on the morning commute. Bagged loaves of sourdough bread blocked U.S. 101, near Petaluma. The highway patrol had to be dispatched.

Last month, a plastic sink was on the loose, stretched across two lanes of the San Mateo Bridge. The sink was something of a departure from the mattresses, aluminum ladders, sofas, buckets - with the occasional spilled Napa County grapes thrown in - that snarled traffic and contributed to the state's daily accumulation of road debris.

While by no means unique to California, pickup trucks and other vehicles piled high with improperly secured loads are a fact of life here, contributing - thanks to the laws of physics - to an estimated 140,000 cubic yards of road debris a year. That is enough to fill 8,750 garbage trucks, which would extend for 45 miles, said Tamie McGowen, a spokeswoman for Caltrans, the state transportation department. And it is increasingly hazardous, experts say.

In California, 155 people lost their lives in the last two years after accidents involving objects on highways, and states are beginning to address the issue.

Next week, a murder trial is set to begin in the death of a Los Angeles county deputy sheriff who was killed when he swerved to avoid a stolen stove that had fallen from a Long Beach man's truck.

In California and across the nation, where some freeway shoulders have come to resemble weekend yard sales, the nature of road debris has changed, and litter anthropologists are now studying the phenomenon.

Where "deliberate" litter used to reign - those blithely tossed fast-food wrappers and the like - "unintentional" or "negligent" litter from poorly secured loads is making its presence felt.

Steven R. Stein, a litter analyst for R. W. Beck, a waste-consulting firm in Maryland, attributes the change to more trash-hauling vehicles, including recycling trucks, and the ubiquity of pickup trucks on the country's highways. In 1986, Mr. Stein said, two-thirds of the debris was deliberate, but surveys now show the litter seesaw balanced.

He said the two most recent surveys indicated a further increase in unintentional litter. In Georgia, which recently quantified its litter,
66 percent of road debris comes from unintentional litter, largely unsecured loads. A study in Tennessee last year showed that 70 percent of the state's debris was unintentional.

By dint of its climate, size, population, lengthy growing season, increasingly long commutes and, perhaps, its casual lifestyle, California is a road-debris leader. It is also home to the country's largest number of registered vehicles - 32 million, twice that of No. 2 Texas - and roughly four million pickup trucks, the most of any state, according to the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers in Washington.

No other state spends more on litter removal, in excess of $55 million, said Christine Flowers-Ewing, the executive director of Keep California Beautiful, a nonprofit environmental education organization.

Motorists in California can be fined if anything other than feathers from live birds or water should escape. (In Nebraska, the exception is corn stalks; in Kentucky, coal.)

Along with mudslides, brush fires and earthquakes, chance encounters with a set of box springs, a chintz cushion or a crate of lettuces are the daily stuff of radio traffic updates, recounted in excruciating detail.

When a tractor-trailer full of freeze-dried oriental soup and vegetables spilled onto the I-710 freeway near Los Angeles, for example, "there was one from Column A, and one from Columns B and C," said Peter Demetriou, a veteran traffic reporter for KFWB radio in Los Angeles. "The only problem was, it was Lane 1, Lane 2 and Lane 3."

Greg Williams, who has worked for the California Highway Patrol in Bakersfield for 27 years, cited a carrot truck spill in the fog on State Highway 84 as his worst case.

"In cities, we chase furniture; in rural areas it's cattle, sheep, horses, buckets and nails," Mr. Williams said. "There's nothing slipperier than a crushed carrot."

A 2004 report on vehicle-related road debris by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety underscored the hazards: In North America, more than 25,000 accidents a year are caused by litter that is dumped by motorists or falls out of vehicles.

"It's really a problem of individual motorists' not understanding the aerodynamics of what wind can do to a mattress," said Scott Osberg, the foundation's director of research.

Two years ago, a horrifying incident in Washington State led to the passage of Maria's law, named for Maria Federici, 24, who was blinded and disfigured when a piece of a shelving unit flew off a trailer and crashed through her windshield. Before the accident, Washington drivers with unsecured loads received a traffic citation and a $194 fine. The tougher law made it a gross misdemeanor if an unsecured load caused an injury, carrying with it a maximum penalty of one year in jail and a $5,000 fine.

Accident statistics alone may not accurately reflect the frequency of such incidents. Last year, a fatality in Washington State, in which a driver swerved to avoid a flying shelf and hit another car, was classified as a collision.

Catching a driver who does not stop can be tricky. "The problem is matching a particular item to a particular driver," said Steve Beeuwsaert, an assistant chief with the California Highway Patrol. "If there is a loveseat in a vehicle and a couch on the road in a matching material, then you've got him."

The most memorable debris call may have been about the female ostrich that fell out of a minivan on the Golden Gate Bridge two years ago.
Traffic stopped in both directions, and the bird was eventually corralled wandering south toward the toll plaza.

Theories on the psychology of unintentional litter vary. Timothy W.Jones, a materials anthropologist at the University of Arizona, speculated that the do-it-yourself phenomenon of self-hauling, particularly home-improvement goods, was a contributing factor, as were high landfill fees that tempt some people to discard items on the road.

Other factors may be more aggressive tailgating and higher speeds that prompt cargo to become airborne, said John D. Schert, executive director of the Hinkley Center for Solid and Hazardous Waste Management at the University of Florida.

The arguably American traits of optimism and self-denial - the nothing-bad-is-going-to-happen-to-me mentality - also affect the trend, said P. Wesley Schultz, a professor of psychology at California State University, San Marcos, who studies littering. "People tend to feel more secure in their vehicles than they really are" at 65 miles per hour, he said.

Litter escalates when the temperature is 50 to 75 degrees, and declines on rainy days, said Daniel Syrek, a litter consultant in Sacramento.

One little-understood aspect of road debris is the percentage generated by commercial vehicles as opposed to private ones. It is the subject of a survey to be conducted in Georgia, where the construction boom has contributed to the problem.

For those who brave California's freeways, errant rakes and brooms may be a continuing challenge of life behind the wheel. Phil Linhares, chief curator of art at the Oakland Museum, who drives frequently between San Francisco and Los Angeles, recalled his own near miss with a chrome dinette set recently.

Mr. Linhares said he made it a point to drive defensively.

"People are real casual here," he said. "If it's not raining, someone says, 'Let's get some string and tie the box spring to the roof rack.'

It's carelessness and utter stupidity."